



FACT SHEET – Chimney Rock Park Acquisition

N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation

January 29, 2007

Upon the 2005 authorization of Hickory Nut Gorge State Park by the N.C. General Assembly, the Division of Parks and Recreation initiated an active land acquisition process supported by the state's three conservation trust funds and nonprofit conservation partners. By the end of 2006, the state parks system had acquired 2,264 acres on both the north and south sides of the gorge in Rutherford County. Funding for those acquisitions has come primarily through the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund, with \$17.7 million earmarked for the project.

With the agreement to purchase the privately owned Chimney Rock Park, the new state park will grow by another 996 acres. The acquisition – virtually in the center of the original concept area – will provide a high-profile focal point for the state park and will offer readily available public access and facilities.

Importantly, the acquisition assures the state of additional property with high natural resource value and strong name recognition in Hickory Nut Gorge and that has been under constant conservation stewardship by the Morse family since 1902.

The Chimney Rock Park Acquisition

The State of North Carolina will purchase Chimney Rock Park from the Morse family (Chimney Rock Company) for \$24 million. Funding will come through a direct appropriation of the General Assembly (2006), the three state conservation trust funds and fund from generous private sources, in the following amounts.

General Assembly Appropriation.....	\$15.00 million
Parks and Recreation Trust Fund.....	1.51 million
Natural Heritage Trust Fund.....	1.80 million
Clean Water Management Trust Fund.....	1.54 million
Donated Funds.....	2.35 million

Anticipated additional funding from	
Natural Heritage Trust Fund.....	1.80 million

The agreement follows nearly 2 1/2 years of discussions and negotiations among Lewis Ledford, director of the state parks system, members of the Morse family and the State Property Office, along with participation from Governor Mike Easley. An early appraisal under the direction of the State Property Office was \$21 million. The Morse family subsequently listed the property with Cape Fear Sotheby's International Realty, Inc. for \$55 million.

The anticipated closing date is in May 2007. Under the terms of the purchase agreement, Chimney Rock Company, under Todd Morse's leadership, will continue to operate Chimney Rock Park at least through the 2007 tourist season. Any interruption in public access will be limited to a brief transition period beginning at the end of November.

Under the agreement, the state parks system will continue to operate Chimney Rock Park in a similar manner as the Morse family until Chimney Rock Park is fully integrated into the state parks system. The state is purchasing all assets of Chimney Rock Company except "Chimney Rock Park" merchandise and certain Morse family memorabilia and personal items.

The Morse family's legacy of stewardship at Chimney Rock Park will be perpetuated in future exhibits at the state park, and a plaque that honors that stewardship on the chimney itself will remain in place.

Partnerships Involved

The acquisition of Chimney Rock Park – and indeed the development of the state park itself – is the result an array of partnerships. The Conservation Fund played a key role in the final stages of negotiations with the owners of Chimney Rock Park. The Nature Conservancy, the Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy and The Foothills Conservancy have each played important roles in the Hickory Nut Gorge project and will continue to be involved in the process.

In addition, individuals and groups developed a network of support for the acquisition. Those include the Town of Lake Lure, Chimney Rock Village, Friends of Hickory Nut Gorge, the Rutherford Outdoor Coalition, the Carolina Climbers Coalition, The Access Fund and the Upper Broad River Protection Program. During the year, Friends of Hickory Nut Gorge began an aggressive letter-writing campaign to build support for state ownership of Chimney Rock.

The acquisition had active support from the governing bodies of the Parks and Recreation, Natural Heritage and Clean Water Management trust funds. And, with the help of Sen. Walter H. Dalton, support and a direct appropriation for the purchase came from the General Assembly.

Chimney Rock Park

Chimney Rock Park is located 25 miles southeast of Asheville on US 64/74A, which bisects Hickory Nut Gorge. The 315-foot-tall rock that is the park's centerpiece offers 75-mile views from an elevation of 2,280 feet above sea level. Visitors reach this point through a 198-foot tunnel in the mountain and an elevator that climbs 26 stories. There is a network of hiking trails leading to a number of unique geologic features as well as the 404-foot Hickory Nut Falls.

The chimney and the adjacent sheer cliffs became a tourist draw in 1885 when Jerome B. Freeman built a stairway to the chimney summit. Lucius B. Morse of Missouri, who fell in love with the gorge during visits, purchased 64 acres on the mountain in 1902 and began development of the park. The park hired a botanist and ornithologist in the 1980s to supplement the work of university researchers who had begun to document the rare plants and natural communities on the mountain. A nature center was built in 1987 and was replaced by a larger center in 1992.

Todd B. Morse has been president and general manager of the park since 1986.

Visitation at the park averages about 250,000 annually, and the park has 28 fulltime employees and employs about 20 seasonal employees.

Hickory Nut Gorge State Park Project

Hickory Nut Gorge was among 47 sites originally listed in the state parks system's New Parks for a New Century initiative, which sprang from a 2001 effort to catalog all known sites of conservation importance, and to score them objectively in terms of natural resource significance and recreation potential. The area scored very high in all criteria.

With 36 rare plant species and 14 rare animal species, the gorge is one of the most significant centers of biodiversity in the state. The spectacular cliffs, fissure caves and unusually rich soils create a cluster of sites that are state and nationally significant in terms of natural heritage. Natural resource specialists have found no fewer than six separate natural communities.

The Nature Conservancy has been aggressive in land conservation in the gorge for years. In 2005, the sensitive World's Edge property of 1,568 acres just southwest of Chimney Rock Park was acquired by The Nature Conservancy and the Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy and transferred to the state for the park project. In addition, more than 400 acres on the north side of the gorge on Rumbling Bald Mountain have been added to the park. The Nature Conservancy owns about 850 acres on the mountain and other tracts in the vicinity that eventually may be added to the park.

The Chimney Rock Park acquisition gives the state parks system and the conservancies a C-shaped arc of protected properties that offers potential for a critical wildlife/species corridor.

Future Management

North Carolina's state parks have a long tradition of natural resource protection and an emphasis on environmental education. The intent is to maintain that tradition as the new state park is developed and Chimney Rock Park is integrated into the state parks system.

During 2007, operations at Chimney Rock Park will continue as usual under the guidance of Todd Morse and the experienced staff of Chimney Rock Company. During this period, the state parks system will develop an *operations plan* to integrate Chimney Rock Park into the larger state park. Both management of the recreation amenities at Chimney Rock and conservation of its unique natural resources will figure prominently in this *operations plan*.

Within the parameters of state personnel policy, employees of Chimney Rock Company will be given every consideration in this planning process. In the 2007-09 biennium budget, the state parks system will request funding for a core state park staff to include a park superintendent and commissioned park ranger(s).

The state parks system and its conservation partners will continue to examine other land acquisition opportunities within Hickory Nut Gorge.

The state parks system relies on a master planning process for long-range development of its parks. At some point in the near future, a master plan for the state park at Hickory Nut Gorge will be created. This process allows for public comment and addresses recreation options, development of facilities and resource protection. Based on this master plan, the division prioritizes capital improvements in the context of all park development across the state. Funding for capital improvements is from the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund, at the direction of the appointed Parks and Recreation Authority.

Contacts

Below is a contact list of partners in the conservation of Chimney Rock Park and the development of Hickory Nut Gorge State Park for purposes of quotes/background, etc.

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Town of Lake Lure

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Map/Photos

A map of the Hickory Nut Gorge area showing acquired park property, the Chimney Rock Park and other conservation lands is available in pdf format on our website. High-resolution, jpeg images of Chimney Rock Park are also available on the site (www.ncsparks.net) . Click "Read the News."